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The Evolution and Degeneration of Party

A STUDY IN POLITICAL HISTORY

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BLIND

I.—*The Evolution and Degeneration of Party.—A Study in Political History.*

By REVEREND DR. N. BURWASH, Victoria College, Toronto.

(Read May 19th, 1903.)

In all countries enjoying either a democratic or a constitutional form of government the political party plays an important part. In primitive times a party formed around the person of a strong military leader was often the means by which the original liberty of the tribe or nation was lost and absolute government established. At a later period a revolutionary party was the means by which that liberty was regained. But in modern times the party is no longer an occasional or extraordinary agency, even being at some great crisis, but a permanent and legally recognised part of the machinery of a free representative government. It is so in Britain, in the United States of America, in Canada, in France, and Germany and even in Japan.

In these cases the party is not the volcanic outbreak of resistance to oppression, but is the result of the fact that the people have a voice in determining the various issues which arise in their history; that they are free to discuss these issues, and to form and express their opinions thereon; and that they can finally give force to those opinions at the polls. The party is the voluntary association of citizens by the help of which public questions are thoroughly discussed, public opinion formed, such opinion on the one side or other propagated and finally made effective in legislation. Such association is absolutely necessary if public opinion is either to be intelligently formed or effectively expressed.

Our object in this study is not to follow the history of the various parties which have arisen in our own or any other country, or to trace their varying fortunes of ins and outs, or their changes of origin, growth and decay. It is rather to treat the party in politics as a species or type, and to determine the forces which contribute to its origin and healthy development. It is to study the laws by which those forces operate, as well as to follow the normal course of the development into the highly complex organism of the modern party. And it is finally to observe the evil influences which contribute to its decay and eventually result in its overthrow.

The method of such a study must, of course, be inductive; and as human nature is the same the world over, and the forces which govern the social or political evolution are universal in their operation, we may

draw our examples from the histories with which we are all familiar, those of Canada, Britain and the United States.

The first fact that meets us, one that lies on the very surface of those histories is, that a living party is created only by the occurrence of some new issue of considerable importance and always of widespread interest. We may adduce as examples the parties which divided the nation from Henry VIII. to Elizabeth, from James I. to Charles II., from James II. to George I. As during this period the constitutional liberty of England was only slowly taking form, the parties were largely revolutionary on the one side and absolutist on the other; but in every case the intense and persistent political life of the party was due to the importance of the issue involved and the widespread interest which consequently attached to it. Such issues occur only in the life of an active and progressive nation. Wherever the people have settled down into a stagnant traditional life, without ambitions or new interests, and things go on as they were, there can be no new creation or birth of party. It is a ripe issue, involving large interests on the one side and the other, intelligently grasped by the people, that possesses this power of giving birth to party life. A merely speculative question cannot constitute such an issue. Academic disputes do not move the people. An issue or question enters the field of practical politics only when it has first entered into the industrial, commercial, or political life of the people, or into their international relations, and so forces itself upon their attention. We doubt whether a case can be found in which an abstract principle formed the basis of successful party life. The issue must take concrete form. We may even go further, and say that it must propose a positive course of action under the circumstances, a definite policy. It is more frequently on the policy or course of action to be pursued than on the end to be attained that party division of opinion arises. The deeper and more permanent party lines, however, imply divergence of ends as well as of methods. The first party lines in the Province of Upper Canada were based on the divergence of Imperial and Colonial interests. The question was, should the country be governed from Downing street according to the ideas and convenience or interests of the Home Government? or by the voice of and in the interests of its own electorate? Such a divergence goes to the very basis of political life and creates a party line of division which may perpetuate itself through the entire national history.

The issue which draws the line of division between parties must be important and permanent as well as practical. It must touch great common interests of the people, interests which are essential to their individual or united well being, and which are continuous in their char-

acter. This is essential not only to the perpetuity of party life, but also to that force or energy which makes a party effective for its political function. A deeply earnest interest is necessary to strong healthy political life and even the most fiery or bitter party spirit is preferable from the moral point of view to apathy and consequent carelessness. Indifference is only less fatal to the welfare of the state than that selfish and corrupt individualism or sectionalism which makes the state the prey of the grasping and unscrupulous schemer.

An issue which is strong enough to awaken and sustain a strong healthy political life will generally result in the creation of two parties. This is especially the case among the Anglo-Saxon peoples who form their opinions with great definiteness and force of character. The French people, with their more delicate logical distinctions, may shade off from the extreme right to the extreme left into five sections whose boundary lines are very clearly defined. This certainly gives more scope for individualism in political life which when pure and healthy may be a very useful characteristic. But in Anglo-Saxon politics it has passed into a proverb that "Every question has two sides." The two sides are not created by the abstract merits of the question itself; for could we at once apprehend the absolute truth of every question there would be but one opinion, and that the correct one. It is the slowness of the human mind to arrive at final truth that renders the conflict of party needful as the process by which that goal is reached; and it is the characteristic one sidedness or imperfection of the human genius which determines its view, from this side or that side, of each individual question. This characteristic habit or attitude is probably more moral than intellectual, a matter of feeling rather than of judgment. On the one hand we have the conservative spirit, attached to things as they are, cautious and critical, averse to all change, lover of the ancient, the venerable and respectable. On the other hand we have the progressive spirit, delighted with the new, with brilliant imagination portraying it in gay colours, venturesome and idealistic, keenly alive to all the imperfections of the present order, and a worshipper of the millennial idea rather than that of hoary antiquity. Under the impulse of the one spirit progress will be slow but safe and solid. Under the other there will be constant activity and movement, but not unfrequently mistakes.

It is not necessary here to enter into the investigation of the various causes which produce this variety of mental attitude. Influence of physical environment, hereditary proclivities, social environment, education, and social, religious or political institutions, all have their influence on the final result, which is the foundation under the stimulus of some practical issue of two antithetic political parties.

One of the early stages in the foundation of parties is the definition of policy, principles, or platform. For the purposes of the successful politician, the simpler and more epigrammatic this is the better. A policy or platform condensed into one or two high-sounding words is wonderfully effective. A policy which is lengthy or hard to understand will thereby work its own defeat. "Protection for our infant industries," "A National Policy," "No taxation without representation," "The United Empire," are familiar examples. This is but a case of the tendency in all ages of the popular mind to condense its experience or convictions into some pithy saying which is the wit of one and the wisdom of many. The policy thus represents the fully conscious stage of political life, the point at which the individual elements are not only uniting into a living organism, but the organism is becoming conscious of its own existence and character.

Another of the early steps in the life of a party is leadership. In revolutionary parties this is naturally military in its character, and may often as the result of mere physical force change the character of the movement which it represents. A good example we have of this in the French Revolution and Napoleon. It began with the widest liberty as its watchword; it ended in the most extreme absolutism. Washington gives us the finest example in history of a leader who never attempted to step aside from the end for which he was called to power.

But the true constitutional leadership party is that which aims at victory by intellectual and moral conviction and not by physical force. Such leadership demands a rare combination of natural endowments and acquired advantages. Wide knowledge, and strong understanding, the gift of clear, forcible and persuasive speech, tact in dealing with men, all contribute to successful leadership. But probably the moral and social qualifications are even more important than the intellectual. Such a man must command public confidence, or even personal affection. To this end the people must have come to know him, and he must have great power of moral or social attraction, a strong personality and personal influence. Recent years have given us conspicuous examples of such leadership—Gladstone, Disraeli, Lincoln, Bismarck, Sir John A. Macdonald, Sir Oliver Mowat. Such leadership is of immense immediate advantage to the cause of any party. And yet if the personal influence of the leader causes the people to lose sight of the issue which is the true life of the party, the death of the leader may easily mean the disintegration of the party. In true healthy political life men should never overshadow the principles which they represent.

The real business of the leader is to make the people understand the nature and importance of the principles which he represents and to

create the enthusiasm for them which leads up to the necessary action. For this purpose leadership in our day has two most important instruments, the platform and the press. Of these the platform is the more immediately powerful. It brings into effective operation not only the rational considerations by which the party position or policy is sustained, but also all the personal influence of the speaker, the force of his emotional nature, his power to transmit this to his audience, in fact the influence of the orator, which was so exemplified in Demosthenes and Cicero. Added to this is the contagious enthusiasm of the audience itself, reacting again on the speaker, and arousing him to the very highest exertion of his powers. But if this is the more immediately powerful agency, the press is far more permanently and more safely influential in its results. It affords opportunity for calm consideration. That which it presents can be reconsidered at leisure and deliberately weighed apart from the tumult of an excited assembly. This is also true of the leader himself. In the calm quiet of his study he can come far nearer to simple truth than under the excitement of the great public gathering. What he writes can be laid aside, reconsidered, improved, and finally presented as the very best. Nor is the process of selection confined to the man alone. The whole country will give its attention not to every one who writes, but to those who write that which is worth reading. To lead the people permanently to the truth the press has thus many advantages over the platform. And to these is to be added the fact that there is no limit to the constituency which it can reach. The physical strength of the greatest orator can reach only thousands where the press reaches millions. The creation of a party press becomes for these reasons one of the most important steps in its evolution.

Following the process of development especially in modern times we are led next to the subject of party organization. This branch of our subject is capable of almost indefinite expansion. It is at the same time a point of great practical interest inasmuch as here first appear those unhealthy influences which lead rapidly to degeneration.

The organization of a party may be of a very simple and of a perfectly legitimate and useful character. If any body of citizens are to co-operate in the effort to bring their convictions and the reasons for them to the notice of their fellow citizens, some form of organization is for this purpose indispensably necessary. There must be a meeting to arrive at a common understanding of their fundamental principles. Such a convention must have a chairman and secretary. It is but a step from this to a permanent organization for the promotion of these principles. To this organization are attached local branches in all parts of the country. To employ the platform and the press in the work of

this organization, it is often necessary to meet the expenses of speakers, writers and printing. All this is regarded as legitimate; but it is bringing us nearer to the sources of danger. The introduction of funds and of paid workers may easily be perverted as we shall see presently. But thus far the fundamental purpose of the organization, the formation of intelligent public opinion is unquestionably both legitimate and useful. Another object of the organization of the party, the selection of the candidates who shall represent the party in the election contest, is a necessary function under a representative system.

But when we turn to the next purpose for which party organization exists and for which it has of late years been greatly extended we have reached our most doubtful and dangerous ground. Is the personal canvass either by the candidate or the party agents legitimate or in the best interests of a pure and free representative government? Every school-boy knows how ancient this practice is and how our very words "candidate" and "ambition" have been derived from it. But even in Rome did it not belong to the age of decline when the man sought the office and not the office the man?

Looking at it in our own day is the personal influence or solicitation of the candidate or of his agents at all a proper influence by which to secure votes? If I vote for a man because he is my friend or has made himself agreeable, or has taken the trouble to ask me, and not because I have a clear conviction that he represents a right policy, am I not as unfaithful to my duty, as if I had voted because he slipped five dollars into my hand? It may be said that only by such a personal canvass and by great effort on election day can the full vote be polled. Granted, but is the vote polled by such methods of any real service to the country? Does it express any political responsibility or any intelligent or honest conviction? Should not all such persons be left to disfranchise themselves? But we will return to this point when we come to consider the degeneration of party in politics.

The battle of party having been fought out at the polls, next presents itself on the floor of the legislative assembly; and there also the political party has its course of development.

Several important particulars differentiate this development from that of the party in the country, or among the electors. The result of the election contest has placed one party in possession of the offices of executive government, and has given them a certain priority in the preparation and presentation of legislation. The work of the governing party becomes thus constructive, that of the other critical. The work of criticism by no means excludes a positive policy directly opposed to that of the government, but the opposition are for the time being with-

out the power of making that policy effective. They can present it and record their votes and reasons in its favour, but with a view to future rather than to present success.

The issues on which the parties divide on the floor of the house are no longer confined to principles or matters of commanding importance, but are extended to minute and well defined legislative action. Many subjects of legislation are thus excluded from the category of party questions and are left to the exercise of individual judgment. It is the prerogative of the Government to choose their ground in bringing forward their programme of legislation, leaving minor matters to individual action. But even after this elimination the field of party issues is greatly enlarged in parliament. The discussion of these issues in parliament has a twofold purpose, justification and conviction. Probably the latter purpose is subordinate. On all party questions, the position of the party is carefully considered and practically determined before the matter is discussed in the house. The speeches are not so much to change votes as to justify the position taken before the country. This is especially true of great issues which have already been explained and considered in caucus. Those items of legislation which are less essential to the party principles and policy may be left for open discussion. That a man should leave his party on a great issue becomes thus a most important matter in parliamentary history and is scarcely ever the result of a discussion or of parliamentary oratory. On the floor of parliament the party thus assumes its distinct function and develops its organization to meet the requirements of that function. The principal elements in this organization are the parliamentary leaders, the whips and the caucus. By means of the caucus the leaders consult the whole body of their followers on important matters of policy. The whips are the agency by which the whole force of the party is made available for a division. Two leaders are recognized in the house, one of the government and one of the opposition, but under these are lieutenants who are intrusted with the defence of particular parts of the party policy as well as called upon for general support of the leaders. The members of the ministry holding seats in the house are, of course, identified with such leadership on the side of the government.

The party thus fully formed and organized has a definite period of historic life often extending through several generations, and sometimes perpetuating by means of its organization a degenerate existence after its formative principles have ceased to have any living efficacy.

Of the normal life of a party the living issue is the creative force, and this normal life is or should be governed by certain ethical principles. A man who takes upon himself the responsibility of being the

representative of his party especially in parliament is believed to have done so from honest, intelligent, and well tried conviction. Loyalty to his party principles is on this account expected of him as a public duty. He can only honourably be released from the obligation by the resignation of his position. In carrying fundamental principles into effect the individual member by his very union with the party submits his individual judgment as to ways and means to the decision of the majority. The very existence of party implies this distinction between principle and methods of its application. To change the principle is to reconstruct the party lines and leaves every man free. Compromise can only be applied to methods.

On the other hand the party owes it to its members to allow large discretion in all matters not affecting its fundamental principles. This is one of the most notable features of English political life and is one of the most important characteristics of wise leadership. Parties organized under the vital influence of those far reaching forces which run through all history, awake to all the new issues which arise in the course of national life and taking up a well defined position on those issues as a matter of honest conviction may perpetuate a healthy political life through many generations. But the secret of this perpetuation of a healthy party life lies in honest conviction. Any influence which brings about deviation from this, or which substitutes for this some other motive must eventually result in overthrow and is in itself a political corruption. The occasion for such degeneration to which we may now turn our attention, arises from the fact that every issue which arises in political life in course of time reaches its solution. The whole truth probably lies with neither party. But even in the extreme case of one party altogether right and the other altogether wrong, there comes a time when the wrong is put right and so the issue ceases. But in the meantime the men who compose the party which thus has attained to victory are a well organized body of men accustomed to act together, and possibly in possession of the reins of government. If new issues have arisen which have been adopted into their party platform a healthy political life may be maintained. But if such is not the case, it will generally be found that the solution of the issue has brought about a nearly even balance of parties, now composed of the ins and outs. It is conceivable that the ins may maintain a pure political life by an able, wise, and honest administration of public affairs, the central motive being the highest interests of the country. The opposition may do the same by watchful, honest criticism of the measures and administration of their opponents, the same unselfish motive governing them. But in such an ideal state of affairs it will be seen that the real life of party has ceased to exist. You have no longer

two living parties divided by a clearly defined set of principles, but the organized bodies of two parties whose living spirit has passed away. One of these bodies is in possession, the other not, and the struggle between the parties may become a mere struggle for power, not for principle. The moment this becomes the case the door is open for the entrance of corruption on both sides of the house. Under these circumstances the best men may be proof against the malign influences; but no party that the world has ever known has been so. So long as the party from honest conviction was engaged in contending for its principles, this very contention, a pure motive, exerted a conserving influence. It kept the party pure. A man who is working from honest convictions will scarcely employ dishonest methods. But when his principles have triumphed and when a generation succeeds to his place who have entered the organization by inheritance and whose convictions have not been called out by clearly defined issues the salt which kept the mass pure has lost its savour. In the struggle for place and power, men enter the lists who are quite unscrupulous as to the means employed for the attainment of their end, and the true, healthy political party degenerates into a corrupt struggle for victory.

It is no uncommon thing that in such cases the best men eschew political life and thereby the evil is rapidly increased. If the evil affected only one party the remedy would seem to be within easy reach. Turn the corrupt party out and bring in a better. But the form of political disease which we have been studying in almost every case affects both political parties alike, and effective remedy must be something far more radical than anything which can be brought about by the triumph of either party.

Another remedy apparently easily at hand is that all good men of all parties should forget the names, associations and conflicts of the past and unite for the purification of political life. One of the most recent and apparently successful examples of this has been the overthrow of Tammany in New York. But reasonable and direct as such a course may appear it presents several serious difficulties if not radical defects.

In the first place such a combination is not easily brought about. It requires something like the presence of a moral plague to awaken the body of even earnest and upright electors to action in such a case. Each party is wide-awake to the defects of its opponents and ready to denounce them most roundly. But that is a very different thing from the breaking up of old party lines, and associations and the construction of a new party for the purification of politics.

Again, such a party once formed and installed in power by its very success has removed its own *raison d'être*. The evil which called

it into being no longer exists, and only the remembrance of it remains to quicken the pulses of party life. I need not mention instances in our own political history which show us how quickly a great scandal as it appears at the time is forgotten. Energetic, permanent party life cannot be maintained on memory. A single generation at most will serve to obliterate the keen sense of wrong and danger, and then for lack of living issues the evil will again creep in.

The remedy which nature provides is the incoming of some new and important positive issue which creates anew a strong, healthy political life. Such an issue is very likely to arise out of the rashness and self confidence of the men whose corrupt course is degrading the political life. It is a fortunate thing for the country if they make such a mistake before the course of corruption has reached its extreme limit. Such questions as the clergy reserves and responsible government are samples in our own country sixty or seventy years ago. They not only created a strong, healthy political life and brought to the front our best types of Canadian statesmen; but they also gave us a period of remarkable freedom from political corruption.

But when in the enjoyment of a healthy and comparatively pure political life, can anything be done to secure its maintenance. This is a question of even greater importance than that of a cure. The solution of this problem must be sought at the very source of the evil. It is often said in a general way that we must raise the moral standard, especially in the political field. This is quite true. The improvement of public sentiment, the quickening of public conscience are all important and needful works. But they can only be brought about by slow evolution. The life of a whole generation is needed to accomplish even the least appreciable result. The downward movement in the field of politics is of a much more rapid character. It does not wait for a whole generation of citizens to become morally corrupt. It can find the material for its purpose, *materies morbi*, in any ordinary generation of men and if the circumstances are favourable its progress is very rapid.

The first step in the course of political corruption is the substitution of party or personal thirst for power for honest party or personal conviction as to principle. The next step plunges both politician and party into the corrupt and mercenary struggle for the loaves and fishes. The next step is not the securing of the regulation loaves and fishes, but the plundering of the country. If this process of degeneration is to be prevented we must guard the first step. Strong constitutional limitations must be placed on the personal and party ambition. The distinction must be clearly drawn between personal and party ambition and zeal for honest even though mistaken convictions. We cannot, of

course, read the hearts of men and human laws cannot control motives. We can only deal with acts. The political activity that arises directly from zeal for convictions is limited to efforts to disseminate truth, by discussion, by voice and pen. The most radical and effective remedy that we can suggest for political corruption is to make all and every form of personal canvass or propagandism which goes beyond the public dissemination and discussion of opinions illegal.

We are well aware of the objections which would be raised to such an election law. Political convictions are disseminated, not merely by the press and public meetings, but also by private discussion. Granted, and granted also that the private discussion of public affairs between individual citizens should not be in any way discouraged, but rather promoted, yet to exclude a mere personal canvass by the candidate, to exclude house to house canvass by agents, and especially to exclude the introduction into a riding of outside people for such a canvass would imply no limitations of the individual liberty of the citizen and would remove the opportunity for a great deal that corrupts modern politics.